RCatT XXXIII/2 (2008) 377-394 © Facultat de Teologia de Catalunya

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE GOSPEL TRADITIONS

Richard BAUCKHAM

St. Mary's College, University of St. Andrews, Escòcia

How did traditions of the sayings of Jesus and the events of his history reach the writers of the Gospels? For nearly a century the answers to that question in mainstream Gospel scholarship have been dominated by the approach known as form criticism (*Formgeschichte*), pioneered by Rudolf Bultmann[1] and Martin Dibelius[2] around 1920. Up until that point, investigation of the question was largely confined to identifying the written sources of the Gospels. The form critics accepted the two-documents hypothesis of Synoptic relationships, but their concern was to press their investigation back into the earlier period of oral transmission. Their view of the process of oral tradition behind the Gospels became foundational for most subsequent study of the Gospels and, even more so, of the historical Jesus. Other approaches to the Gospels followed –redaction criticism and literary criticism– which have taught us to see the Gospel writers more as creative authors than the form critics did. The Gospel writers had literary designs and theological agendas. But such approaches have usually been seen as building on the foundation the form critics laid. The Gospel writers may have shaped their material more than the early form critics supposed, but the material they shaped came to them through a process of oral tradition envisaged in much the way the form critics proposed. Meanwhile there have been some very damaging criticisms made of the form

1. Rudolf BULTMANN, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (tr. J. Marsh; Oxford: Blackwell 1963; ^{2}1968). The German original, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition,* was first published in 1921 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).

2. Martin DIBELIUS, *From Tradition to Gospel* (tr. B. L. Woolf; London: Nicholson and Watson 1934). The German original, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangelium,* was first published in 1919.

critical approach,[3] but the cumulative effect of them has not been widely noticed. It is my contention that the form critical paradigm has now been comprehensively disproved, and it is time we adopted another paradigm for understanding how the Gospel traditions were preserved in the predominantly oral period prior to the written Gospels.

1. The form critical paradigm

For the form critics the Gospels were folk literature, which they compared with the material studied by the folklorists of their day. It was axiomatic for them that this type of oral tradition was formed and transmitted by the folk, not by individuals, and that the communities that valued such folklore had no interest of any kind in history. The Jesus traditions, they held, by analogy, were anonymous community traditions, passed down in the early Christian communities, not connected to individuals such as those who had been eyewitnesses of Jesus' history, but only to the community itself. They were transmitted not by people concerned to relate past history, but for purposes orientated solely to the communities' present, and could therefore be freely modified or even created *de novo* in accordance with the community's present needs.

Working on these assumptions, the form critics attempted to classify the various forms in which individual units of Jesus tradition were cast and to relate each form to a particular function it would have fulfilled in the early communities. Closely associated was the notion of tradition history. Utilizing supposed laws of the tradition —standard ways in which the traditions were held to have developed— and the assumption that each tradition originally existed in pure form, unlike the mixed and anomalous forms that are found in the Gospels, it was supposed possible to trace the history of a tradition back from the Gospels to a reconstructed original or at least a form of the tradition earlier than that preserved in any of the Gospels. In this way the texts of the Gospels were put at a considerable distance from the beginnings of the Gospel tradition. Highly creative developments could be postulated.

However, tradition history as such could scarcely be a tool for reaching back to the historical Jesus himself, since there could be no guarantee that even the reconstructed early versions of traditions had anything to do with the historical Jesus. The communities, after all, had no concern with authenticity or

3. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006, 246-249; cf. also Martin Hengel, «Eye-witness memory and the writing of the Gospels», in Markus Bockmuehl – Donald A. Hagner (ed.), *The Written Gospel* (Festschrift for Graham N. Stanton) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, 70-96, here 76-88.

history. For scholars unwilling to give up the quest of the historical Jesus, therefore, the famous criteria of authenticity became necessary. The fact such criteria are usually applied individually to each unit of Jesus tradition in the context of a sceptical view of the historical value of the Gospel traditions as a whole follows directly from the form critical view of the oral tradition. Since the search for authentic historical Jesus material runs against the grain of the oral tradition itself, the only way to proceed was to operate extremely rigorous criteria designed to rescue isolated bits of authentic tradition.

Finally, I should add that many scholars have combined the general form critical view of the oral tradition with a more conservative attitude to its reliability in preserving authentic traditions about Jesus. But this really requires taking a different view from the form critical one about the nature of the early communities' interest in the traditions and about the extent to which the communities may have exercised control over the traditions, restraining free creativity in the process of transmission. In other words, some serious criticism of the form critical paradigm is entailed.

2. Criticisms of the form critical paradigm

We shall begin with criticisms relating to the nature of oral tradition in the light of the much more plentiful evidence we now have from the study of oral societies. The early form critics may have used the best model available to them of the nature of oral tradition, but it was a model that cannot be supported now. One very important preliminary point to make is the wide variety, found in oral or predominantly oral societies, of types, contents, functions and means of transmission of oral traditions.[4] Most generalizations are hazardous, and so we should be suspicious of arguments about what must have been true of the Gospel traditions on the grounds that that is what oral tradition is like. Many features of oral traditions are culturally specific, not universally the same.

For example, it is not true that oral tradition is invariably communal, rather than being connected with particular individuals who compose and rehearse traditions. We now realise how important individual tradents are in many oral societies. The traditions are composed, preserved and performed by individuals, who, while operating, of course, in a community context, are the authori-

4. Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, 159, 175-177; Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History,* Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 197.

5. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality,* 72-73; Ruth Finnegan, «Tradition, But What Tradition and For Whom? The Milman Parry Lecture on Oral Tradition for 1989-9», *Oral Tradition* 6/1

ties and responsible for the form in which the traditions are known.[5] Another unjustified generalization is that oral societies have no interest in the past and appear to speak of it only as a way of describing the present. Interest in history varies from one oral society to another, and the issue must be considered in relation to the particularities of specific cultures.[6] But it is common for oral societies to distinguish factual accounts from fictional tales, and to transmit the two differently, the former with more regard for faithful reproduction of content.[7] Jan Vansina writes that he cannot be sure whether this kind of distinction in practice is actually universal, but he is sure that it is widespread.[8] An observation important for our purposes is that, at least in African oral societies, the kind of account that is treated with special care for its faithful reproduction is often that which recounts events within living memory.[9]

It has been widely supposed, partly because of the well-known studies of the practice of south Slavic bards by Milman Parry and Albert Lord,[10] that oral traditions are normally subject to creative variation from performance to performance, such variation being fully expected by their audience. But Ruth Finnegan challenges this generalization with evidence from other societies showing that «more or less exact memorization» of oral texts is also a common pattern, perhaps not over centuries but over «shorter time spans», and interestingly for our purposes she observes that one case in which such memorization may be thought particularly important is that of «texts that have a definite religious value or function».[11]

An important point about significant variation, where it does occur, as, of course, it frequently does, is that one performance varies from another, but this is not a process of incremental change, such that each stage of tradition builds on the previous one, like a literary text edited again and again. This does not mean there cannot be significant changes over time, but that it is impossible to

---

(1991) 104-124, here 111; Vansina, *Oral Tradition,* 36-39; Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Background, Character, and Continuity,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1992, chapter 2. The point was already made, in criticism of form criticism, by Thorlief Boman, *Die Jesus-Überlieferung im Lichte der neueren Volkskunde,* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967, 10. 29.

6. Vansina, *Oral Tradition,* 122. 129-130.

7. Vansina, *Oral Tradition,* 25-26. 53-54.

8. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 14.

9. Okpewho, *African Oral Literature,* 183. (His use of the term «legend» is not intended to bear on the issue of factuality).

10. Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales,*Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960; Íd., *The Singer Resumes the Tale,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995; Adam Parry (ed.), *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

11. Finnegan, *Literacy,* 173.

trace a tradition history back through a series of changes to a putative original form.[12]

Perhaps the most important general point for our purposes is that oral societies treat different kinds of tradition differently, expecting faithful reproduction in some cases and creative variation in others. When faithful reproduction is required, such societies have a variety of means at their disposal to ensure it. Whether verbally exact reproduction can be achieved may be doubtful, though it is significant that in some cases this is attempted,[13] but substantially faithful reproduction may be both desired and achieved. Methods of ensuring this include both entrusting the traditions to authorized, even trained guardians, and the checking against community memory that will often occur as a tradition is rehearsed.[14]

It turns out, then, that the study of oral tradition in modern oral societies worldwide can set some parameters within which we might expect a particular case, such as the Jesus traditions, to fall, but permits very little specific determination of what the transmission of the Jesus traditions must have been like. For that we have to consider the specific cultural context in which it occurs and the evidence we actually have in the Gospels.

Before we turn to that, there is a more radical and far-reaching criticism to be made of the form critics' concept of oral tradition in early Christianity: that at best they applied a model appropriate to transmission of traditions across many generations to a process that occurred within no more than a relatively long lifetime. While the notion of laws of tradition governing the changes that occur over time is dubious in any case, it is certainly not obvious that the same processes of change to which folklore transmitted over centuries may be subject are likely to occur over much shorter periods. We have already noticed that some oral societies certainly treat traditions differently if they recount events within living memory, and it is of crucial importance that the Gospels were written within living memory of the events, even though in some cases at the latest date when this could be true. It means that the Gospel writers' relationship to the traditions was not that of recorders (and users) of oral traditions but that of writers of oral history.

Modern writers, such as Jan Vansina, who are concerned with the way history can be written on the basis of oral sources make a clear distinction

12. James D. G. Dunn, «ltering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition», *NTS* 49 (2003) 139-175, here 144-145. 172; *Jesus Remembered,* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, 194-195, 248-249; Werner H. Kelber, «The Case of the Gospels: Memory's Desire and the Limits of Historical Criticism», *Oral Tradition* 17/1 (2002) 55-86, here 64.

13. Bruce A. Rosenberg, «The Complexity of Oral Tradition», *Oral Tradition* 2/1 (1987) 73-90, here 81-82; Finnegan, *Literacy*, 166-167. 174-175. 158. 173-174.

14. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 41-42; Rosenberg, «The Complexity», 85-86.

between oral tradition and oral history.[15] Traditions formulated and repeated by living eyewitnesses still belong to individual memories, which have not yet been superseded by collective memory. To a significant extent it was the writing of the Gospels themselves that made the recollections of eyewitnesses into the shared memory of the community. In the oral period, since it was the period of living memory, we must reckon with the eyewitnesses, something the form critics conspicuously did not do. The fact that the form critics neglected the factor of living memory and treated the transmission of Gospel traditions as analogous to transmission over much longer periods accounts for the impression one often gets from reading modern Gospels scholarship that the period between the events and the Gospels was a very much longer one than it actually was. In fact, it was the period in which the eyewitnesses were still alive and available to tell their stories.[16] We shall return to the eyewitnesses before long.

3. Aspects of the evidence

We have seen that whether a particular oral society has a real sense of history and is concerned to transmit historical traditions relatively faithfully is a matter of specific culture that cannot be predicted *a priori.* In the case of early Christianity it has frequently been shown that Christians did have a clear sense of pastness. Not only the Gospels themselves but also the traditions they relate show consciousness of a distinction between the period of the ministry of Jesus and the period after his resurrection. Of course, Christians were interested not in the past purely for its own sake (very few people in the ancient world were), but in the religiously relevant past. But their concern, deriving no doubt from the early Christian movement's strongly Jewish understanding of salvation history and eschatology, was precisely for the religiously relevant *past*. They did not collapse the past history of Jesus into the pure present of his exalted lordship and presence in the community.[17]

This indicates that the early Christian movement had an interest in preserving the traditions about Jesus faithfully. This, of course, need not mean *verbatim*. It is quite consistent with a degree of variation from one performance to another. This again cannot be predicted *a priori* from a model of oral tradition, but must be determined from the evidence we have for the Jesus traditions. Our best evidence is the degree of variation that actually exists in parallel passages

15. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 12-13. 27-29.

16. That writers of the Gospels wrote self-consciously within the lifetime of some, at least, of the eyewitnesses is clear from Matt 16,28; 24,34; Mark 9,1; 13,30; Luke 9,27; 21,32; John 21,23.

17. For fuller discussion of the topic of this paragraph, see Bauckham, *Jesus*, 271-278.

of the Gospels, especially if we can assume that the Gospel writers varied their sources in much the same way that one oral performance might differ from another. It has often been noticed that, as a general rule, there is more close verbal correspondence in the case of sayings of Jesus than there is in narratives. It would be entirely consistent with what we know of oral tradition if more or less exact reproduction was generally expected for sayings, whereas, in the case of narratives, what was expected to remain constant was the main structure and core elements, while inessential detail could vary, resulting, among other things, in shorter or longer versions.

Once we have abandoned form critical presuppositions about the way traditions must have developed, there is probably no reason to suppose that the degree of variation in the traditions was ever greater than the variation we can observe in the extant Gospels and in other equally early versions of Gospel traditions (such as Paul's citation of the Last Supper tradition in 1 Corinthians, and perhaps some apocryphal Gospel material). We do not need to postulate original versions of traditions differing widely from the extant versions. Finally, since the evidence shows a broadly conservative preservation of traditions, we should not expect sayings of Jesus or stories about Jesus to have been regularly, as a matter of course, invented *de novo* and added to the tradition, as the form critics supposed. Prophecy in the name of the exalted Lord was not regarded as the same kind of thing as traditions of his earthly sayings.

These conclusions do not indicate some kind of infallible preservation of traditions completely unchanged. The evidence is clear that relatively small modifications of and additions to the traditions were made for interpretative reasons, presumably by authorized tradents, such as the Gospel writers themselves.[18] But the form critics' notion that whole categories of tradition were determined by their function in a specific kind of *Sitz im Leben* is supported neither by our general knowledge of oral tradition[19] nor by the specific evidence we have about the Gospel traditions. Miracle stories, for example, probably functioned in several ways: to provide an example for faith, to illustrate the nature of the kingdom of God, or to point to the divine authority of Jesus. The basic form of a miracle story served all these functions. Small variations might sometimes orient a story in one of these directions, but the functions did not determine the form, let alone the origin of the stories.

In summary, then, the early Christian communities most likely distinguished historical accounts from fictional stories in the way many oral societies do. One performance of a tradition would vary from another, more so in the case of stories about Jesus than in the case of remembered sayings of Jesus.

18. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 286.
19. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 100-102.

But variation was simply from one performance to another, not in the form of a unilinear development that would enable us to reconstruct tradition history in the form critical manner. Some interpretative modifications were sometimes made, but neither these modifications nor the more ordinary performative variations need have created greater differences than we can observe in the parallel material of the Gospels. If all this is correct, the crucial factor that remains to be considered is how the traditions were controlled. The form critics postulated entirely uncontrolled transmission by the community as such. To establish an alternative paradigm we need to determine how the substantially faithful preservation of the traditions was achieved.

4. An alternative paradigm: eyewitness testimony

An eminent British New Testament scholar of the mid-twentieth century, Vincent Taylor, who was himself in favour of a moderate version of form criticism, once remarked that, if the form critics were right, the eyewitnesses to the history of Jesus must have ascended to heaven immediately after Jesus' resurrection. He went on to point out that many eyewitness participants in the events of the Gospel narratives «did not go into permanent retreat; for at least a generation they moved among the young Palestinian communities, and through preaching and fellowship their recollections were at the disposal of those who sought information».[20] The point was that, while the form critics allowed that any authentic Jesus tradition must originally have derived from eyewitnesses, the eyewitnesses played no further part in their reconstruction of the transmission of the traditions. By omitting the eyewitnesses from any continuing role, the form critics were able to place several decades of oral transmission between the eyewitnesses and the Gospels. The Gospel accounts must be assumed to have only a very distant relationship with the way the stories were first told or the sayings of Jesus reported by the immediate disciples of Jesus.

In my recent book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*,[21] I have tried to work through the implications of supposing that the eyewitnesses did not disappear from the early Christian movement as soon as they had formulated some traditions. The eyewitnesses were not only still alive through the relevant period, but were in touch with the Christian communities. The major eyewitnesses, such as the twelve apostles, were very well known.

20. Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* London: Macmillan, ^{2}1935, 41-42.

21. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

They would have remained throughout their lifetimes the accessible sources and authoritative guarantors of the traditions they themselves had formulated at the beginning. Moreover, as well as the major eyewitnesses, mostly the well known disciples of Jesus, there were also many minor eyewitnesses, who told the story perhaps of the miracle by which they themselves had been healed by Jesus or of some other encounter with Jesus that had changed their lives.

Paul, writing his first letter to the Corinthians around the year 50, twenty years after the event, recites a well-known catalogue of people to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection. Among them he mentions an appearance to five hundred believers at the same time, «many of whom», he adds, «are still alive» (1 Cor 15,6). This comment would be pointless unless he meant, «If you don't believe me, check it out with some of those people». If he could say that with regard to minor eyewitnesses, as most of the five hundred must have been, how much more would it have been true of the major eyewitnesses, people such as the twelve apostles and James the brother of Jesus, whom Paul also includes in his list. He did not need to say that they were still alive and well at the time of writing because his readers would have been well aware of that. That many eyewitnesses were not only still alive but also accessible is taken for granted.

We have seen that in oral societies traditions are not by any means necessarily the anonymous community traditions the form critics postulated, but can be closely associated with individuals. It could be the case that the Jesus traditions were in many cases associated with the named individuals or groups (such as the Twelve) from whom they originated. We shall shortly see reason to think this. If the eyewitnesses continued to be well known in the early Christian movement, it would be natural for them to be treated as the authoritative sources and guardians of their traditions. In the last resort it was they who could ensure the stability of the traditions.

Of course, it is not likely that eyewitnesses were constantly available in all communities. Since we know that early Christian leaders were much travelled,[22] many communities might be visited by eyewitnesses from time to time, and were even more likely to be in touch with people who had the Gospel traditions direct from the eyewitnesses. It is unlikely that the eyewitnesses could have been the sole controllers of the tradition. Doubtless there were teachers in the churches charged with this task. But advantage would certainly be taken of any opportunities to check traditions with the eyewitnesses or to receive more traditions from them. The general point that is of special interest to us is that, if this is a plausible picture, then the writers of the Gospels would themselves

22. See Richard BAUCKHAM, «For Whom Were Gospels Written?», in Richard BAUCKHAM (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences,* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998, 9-48, here 33-37.

have taken any opportunity to tap the traditions at source, rather than simply relying on the oral tradition of some particular Christian community, as is often assumed.

We have observed already that, because they were written within living memory of the events, the Gospel writers should be seen, not so much as recorders of oral tradition, more as composers of oral history.[23] The distinctive importance of accessing traditions within living memory, while eyewitnesses are still available, is common both to modern oral history and to the way history was envisaged in the Greco-Roman literary context of the Gospels. Ancient historians believed that history could only properly be written within the lifetime of eyewitnesses whom the historian could himself interview face to face. This demanding criterion of adequate testimony was, even if not always practised, at least widely regarded as historiographical best practice.[24]

The form critics were right to envisage significant continuity between the texts of the Gospels and the oral traditions as they existed prior to the Gospels, but they were wrong to identify this continuity as what one would expect of folk literature. The Gospels, as has been convincingly argued by recent scholars, should be generically classified as Grcco-Roman biographies (*bioi*).[25] As contemporary biographies, written within living memory of their subject, they are the sort of biography that would be expected to share the best practice of contemporary historiography with regard to sources. The continuity, therefore, between the Jesus traditions in oral form and their incorporation in the Gospels should be seen as resembling the continuity between the eyewitnesses sources and their incorporation in historiographical works, as Samuel Byrskog has argued.[26] It is important to notice that, if the first readers or hearers of the Gospels identified them generically as historical biography, they would expect them to be closely based on eyewitness testimony, and alert to indications in them as to who the eyewitnesses were.

The Gospels are closer to oral storytelling than most of the examples of Greek and Roman biography that have come down to us. This is doubtless because the survival of classical literature strongly favoured literature written at a higher literary level than the Gospels, which probably resemble more the many popular biographies of their time that have not survived. But the incor-

---

23. For the Gospels as oral history, see HENGEL, «Eye-witness memory», 87; Samuel BYRSKOG, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History,* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000; Leiden: Brill 2002.

24. BYRSKOG, *Story,* 48-65. 146-176. 200-223.

25. This has been demonstrated especially by Richard A. BURRIDGE, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography* (SNTSMS 70) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; expanded edition: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2004).

26. BYRSKOG, *Story.*

poration of oral sources into a narrative composition was certainly not distinctive to the Gospels. On the contrary, as I have mentioned already, it was part of the best practice of Greco-Roman historiography. The difference is rather that the more literary works assimilated their sources into a more complex and sophisticated narrative whole. The Gospel writers, especially Mark, seem to have deployed in writing the skills of the oral storyteller.[27]

This close relationship between orality and literacy is not surprising. Studies of oral tradition have increasingly tended to modify the sharp distinctions between orality and literacy that earlier theorists proposed.[28] In the case of the Gospels we are, of course, dealing with a predominantly oral society (in the sense that the majority of people were illiterate) in which, nevertheless, writing played an important part. Illiterate people dictated and sent letters, received and had letters read to them. They possessed legal documents they could not themselves read. Inscriptions were plentiful and prominent in their cities. They even heard literary works read, and we should remember that the Gospels were written primarily to function within an oral context, read aloud to hearers already familiar with the traditions in oral form. Besides shaping the traditions into a narrative whole, the most important difference the writing of the Gospels made was that it preserved the testimonies of the eyewitnesses beyond their lifetimes. This was a natural function of writing, exemplified by Greco-Roman historiography, in a society that valued accurate memories of the past and did not consider that oral tradition at too many removes from the eyewitnesses could be relied on to supply them.

We turn now to some reasons for supposing that the Gospels are close to the testimony of the eyewitnesses, and that contemporary readers or hearers would have been able to identify at least the major eyewitnesses to which the narratives were indebted.

5. Names in the Gospels

A starting-point for considering whether the Gospels actually indicate their eyewitness sources is to observe the way names occur in the Gospels,[29] including a phenomenon that has not been adequately explained. It is not surprising that well-known public persons, such as Pontius Pilate the Roman governor and the high priest Caiaphas, are named in the Gospels. Nor is it surprising that

27. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 231-233.

28. See especially Finnegan, *Literacy*.

29. Hengel, «Eye-witness memory», 86-87, independently makes very briefly the argument I develop in Bauckham, *Jesus*, chapter 3.

disciples of Jesus who play a major part in the stories —Peter, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and so on— are named. Nor perhaps is it very surprising that most of the more minor characters are anonymous. The Gospels are full of unnamed individuals who come into contact with Jesus on just one occasion. What is difficult to explain is why just some of these minor characters *are* given names. Why is it that in Mark's Gospel Jairus and Bartimaeus are named,[30] while all other recipients of Jesus' healings are anonymous? Why does Luke, in his narrative of the two disciples who meet the risen Jesus on the way to Emmaus, name one of the two (Cleopas)[31] but not the other? Why does Mark go to the trouble of naming not only Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross to Calvary, but also his two sons, Alexander and Rufus?[32] Why does Luke name Zacchaeus the tax collector and Simon the Pharisee?[33] Given that a very large majority of the minor characters in all the Gospels are anonymous, why do they name specifically those few who are named?

The only hypothesis I know that accounts for the evidence is that in most of these cases the named persons became members of the early Christian communities and themselves told the stories in which they appear in the Gospels. These traditions were transmitted under their names. It was from Bartimaeus himself that Mark's narrative of his healing came, and from Cleopas, not his companion, that Luke's story of the walk to Emmaus derived.

6. The principle of eyewitnesses «from the beginning»[34]

We can plausibly suppose that the Gospels incorporate some individual stories that were told by the individuals in question. But if the Gospels are based on eyewitness testimony to any larger extent, there must have been eyewitnesses whose testimony covered all or much of the ministry of Jesus. In fact, we find just such a category of eyewitnesses singled out as of special importance in the New Testament itself, by both Luke and John. In the first chapter of Acts Luke tells the story of how Judas Iscariot was replaced by Matthias to make up the number of the twelve apostles. The qualification to be one of the Twelve was that such a person must (as Peter says) «have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day that he was taken up from us».[35] The twelve apostles

30. Mark 6,3; 10,46.
31. Luke 24,18.
32. Mark 15,21.
33. Luke 19,2; 7,40.
34. This section and the next summarize my argument in Bauckham, *Jesus*, chapter 6.
35. Acts 1,21-22.

seem to have been seen as the official body of eyewitnesses of Jesus, but Luke's narrative also indicates that there were others besides the Twelve who fulfilled that qualification.[36] Luke appeals to this principle also in the preface to his Gospel, where he says that he has recorded traditions as they were transmitted by those «who were eyewitnesses *from the beginning*», and, further, that he has familiarized himself with everything *from the beginning*.[37] He means he has consulted eyewitnesses who could tell the story from its beginning onwards.

We find the same principle in John's Gospel, where Jesus speaks to his disciples about the way they are to give testimony about him in the future: «you are to testify because you have been with me *from the beginning*».[38] This principle of eyewitness testimony «from the beginning» must have been current in the early church. It is precisely the kind of qualification that mattered in ancient historiography that depended on eyewitness testimony, and it shows that the Gospel writers were aware of and intended to meet the expectations of readers who understood their work to be historical biography and would therefore look for indications of its sources in eyewitness testimony.

If readers or hearers of the Gospels wondered who could have given eyewitness testimony from the beginning to the end of the story, not necessarily including every event or saying within a Gospel, but encompassing the broad mass of the material, they might naturally think of the Twelve, that group of disciples who were singled out by Jesus for a special role in his movement, and who exercised an authoritative role in the movement as it developed in Jerusalem in the early days. In fact, all three of the Synoptic Gospels provide a full list of the twelve members of this group.[39] Our currently much improved knowledge of naming practices in Jewish Palestine shows that these lists are carefully and accurately preserved, providing not only the bare personal names of the Twelve (Simon, Judas, James and so on), but also patronymics (such as «sons of Zebedee» or Bartholomew), nicknames (such as Peter) and other epithets (such as «the zealot»). The lists preserve the way each was actually known within their circle during the ministry of Jesus. The care with which the lists are presented suggests that they are setting out the credentials of those who were regarded as the official body of witnesses, those who would vouch for the most important material incorporated by each of these three Gospels.

---

36. Acts 1,23.
37. Luke 1,2-3.
38. John 15,27.
39. Matt 10,2-4; Mark 3,16-19; Luke 6,13-16; cf. also Acts 1,13. For a discussion of the differences between the lists, which do not, as has sometimes been argued, show that the membership of the Twelve was not remembered carefully, see BAUCKHAM, *Jesus*, 97-101.

If the Twelve were the major eyewitnesses for the broad mass of traditions we find in Mark's Gospel and in the parallel material in Matthew and Luke, then we should also note that there is a key part of the narrative from which the Twelve are noticeably absent and could not have served as the eyewitnesses. This part of the narrative, including the story of the crucifixion and death of Jesus, his burial and the discovery of the empty tomb, is such a crucially important part of the whole Gospel narrative that eyewitness sources surely matter here more than anywhere. If not the Twelve, who were they? The first readers or hearers would surely expect to know. This is where Simon of Cyrene comes in, along with his sons, through whom, presumably, his story reached Mark.[40] But even more important are the women disciples, who in Mark appear only here in the whole Gospel. Three of them are carefully named (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome). All three are said to be present at the cross, two of these at the burial, and all three at the empty tomb.[41] Also noteworthy is the way they are continually the subject of verbs of seeing: they «were looking on» when Jesus was crucified and died; they «saw» where he was laid in the tomb; they «saw» the stone rolled away; they «saw» the young man sitting on the right side; and he invites them to «see» the empty place where Jesus' body had lain.[42] It could hardly be clearer that it is as eyewitnesses that they have their place in the narrative.

7. The *inclusio* of eyewitness testimony

An important way in which, I argue in my book, the Gospels of Mark and Luke indicate their major eyewitness sources is by the use of a literary device I call the *inclusio* of eyewitness testimony. (An *inclusio* is a common phenomenon in ancient literature - a sort of bookend structure, in which a passage, short or long, begins and ends with corresponding material). If we look carefully at the way Mark's Gospel uses names we may notice that the first of Jesus' disciples to be named in the Gospel and the last disciple to be named are the same person: Simon Peter.[43] Peter is also overwhelmingly the disciple most often named in the intervening material. Moreover, the first mention of Peter is emphasized by the repetition of the name in a way that was not actually neces-

40. Mark 15,21; cf. Matt 27,32; Luke 23,26.

41. Mark 14,40-41, 47; 16,1; cf. Matt 27,55-56, 61; 28,1; Luke 24,10.

42. Mark 15,40, 47; 16,4, 5, 6; cf. Matt 27,55; 28,1, 6; Luke 23,49, 55.

43. Mark 1,16; 16,7. The first to see this as a deliberate rhetorical *inclusio,* designed to stress Peter's unique importance in the Gospel, was Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (tr. J. Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1985) 51; Íd., *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (tr. J. Bowden; London: SCM Press 2000) 82.

sary to the narrative («Simon and Andrew, Simon's brother»).[44] Peter therefore is the disciple whom the Gospel of Mark highlights as fulfilling the principle of eyewitness testimony from beginning to end. Mark's *inclusio* of Peter is a way of indicating Mark's major eyewitness source. (This point does not contradict what I have suggested about the role of the Twelve. Peter's version of the traditions about Jesus would have been his own version of the traditions common to the Twelve.)

That Mark does use such a literary device we can confirm from Luke's Gospel, the one that enunciates the principle of eyewitness testimony «from the beginning» in its preface. Luke positions the name of Peter just as Mark does: he is both the first disciple named (again with an emphatic reiteration of the name: «Simon…Simon's mother-in-law») and also the last disciple to be named in Luke's Gospel.[45] But Luke has not just taken over the same references to Peter that form Mark's *inclusio*. (In that case, the phenomenon might be only an accidental result of Luke's appropriation of Mark's narratives). Luke has created his own *inclusio* by the way he has positioned references to Peter in his own material. They are not the same references as Mark's. This is good evidence that Luke recognized the use of this literary convention in Mark and copied it. It is Luke's way of acknowledging his debt to Mark's Gospel, understood as the written embodiment of Peter's testimony.

Of course, Luke has much material in his Gospel that he has not taken from Mark. I think Luke may have indicated the source of some of this by means of another *inclusio,* though this is not as clearly marked as the Petrine *inclusio.* This second inclusio is that of the women disciples. Alone among the Gospels Luke refers to the women disciples of Jesus, with names, at an early point in the Galilean ministry, and only Luke indicates that these women were present with Jesus and the male disciples throughout a major part at least of Jesus' whole ministry.[46] The other Gospels list the names of women disciples present at the cross, but Luke withholds repeating the names of the women until after his story of their visit to the empty tomb of Jesus.[47] Thus Luke's two lists of named women form an *inclusio* around a large part of his narrative, though not as much as Peter's *inclusio* spans. It is entirely credible that some of Luke's special material originated with the testimony of Joanna, Susanna, and Mary Magdalene, perhaps most especially from Joanna, who is named only by Luke and is given some prominence in Luke's narrative. She may well have been an important eyewitness source for Luke.

---

44. Many modern English translations translate this as: «Simon and his brother Andrew» (NRSV). The repetition of Simon is as unnecessary in the Greek as it is in the English.
45. Luke 4,38; 24,34.
46. Luke 8,2-3, cf. 24,6-8.
47. Luke 24,10.

We can find a quite subtle use of the same literary device of *inclusio* in the Gospel of John.[48] This Gospel is the one that claims to have been *written* by an eyewitness. Its closing verses attribute it to that disciple, anonymous in the text, whom the Gospel calls «the disciple Jesus loved».[49] Scholars conventionally call him the Beloved Disciple. In my view, John, like Luke, knew Mark's Gospel and expected his readers to know it, though he does not, like Luke, draw on Mark's Gospel as a source (or only rarely). His Gospel is written to make his own contribution, to bear the witness to Jesus that he believes to be more insightful even than Peter's. So the first disciple to appear in John's narrative is himself, anonymously,[50] and the last to appear is the same, now called «the disciple Jesus loved».[51] In each case Peter is close at hand. At the beginning the Beloved Disciple just precedes Peter, while at the end he just follows Peter. It is as though he is saying, «Certainly Peter qualifies as a witness from beginning to end, as you know. But actually, although I'm not one of the famous disciples you'll have heard of, so do I. Peter has given his testimony (in Mark's Gospel), but there's plenty left for me to say.»

8. Mark as Peter's Gospel[52]

Are there other reasons, besides the *inclusio* of eyewitness testimony, to think that Peter's testimony lies quite closely behind Mark's narrative? Almost all introductions to commentaries on Mark cite, even if only to dismiss, the well-known fragment of the work of Papias of Hierapolis about the origin of Mark's Gospel.[53] In a statement echoed by many later writers in the early church, Papias claimed that Mark had worked as Peter's interpreter and wrote down the Gospel traditions as Peter had recounted them. There was a time when most scholars thought this a credible and plausible view of Mark's Gospel, but more recently most have dismissed it. The main reason is that the form critical way of conceiving of Gospel origins could not allow it.[54] Now that the form critical paradigm can be seen to be fundamentally flawed, it is time to reconsider Papias's credibility.

48. For a full discussion, see Bauckham, *Jesus*, 127-129, 390-393.
49. John 21,20-24.
50. John 1,35-40.
51. John 21,20-24.
52. This section summarizes my arguments in Bauckham, *Jesus*, chapters 7 and 9.
53. It is preserved in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.14-16.
54. For discussion of other objections to Papias's statement, see Bauckham, *Jesus*, 239.

Papias was collecting traditions about Jesus originating from named disciples of Jesus, a few of them still alive and resident not far from his home town, in the late first century, around the time when the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John were being written. He wrote (or at least completed) his book some years later, but it was in the late first century that he assembled his material.[55] So he really was in a position to know something about how the Gospels originated, and his evidence about Mark's Gospel deserves to be taken more seriously than it has been in recent scholarship. But the plausibility of Papias's account emerges particularly strongly when we can correlate it with indications in Mark's Gospel itself that Peter was the main source of its traditions. We have already noticed the Petrine *inclusio* of eyewitness testimony in Mark, as well as the very frequent naming of Peter throughout the Gospel. In addition, I have argued in my book that Mark's Gospel has been written in such a way as to give readers or hearers predominantly Peter's perspective on the events as they unfold.[56]

In conclusion, to understand how the Gospels relate to the oral transmission of Gospel traditions we can no longer rely on the form critical paradigm. Especially in the light of our current knowledge of the nature of oral tradition, that paradigm must be not merely modified but simply abandoned. I suggest that a more fruitful approach to our topic is provided by the paradigm of eyewitness testimony, according to which we should not envisage the Gospels as separated from the eyewitnesses by a long period of anonymous community tradition, but as based on the testimony of the eyewitnesses, often directly, rarely at more than two stages of transmission removed. The Gospels are oral history based on and even incorporating the testimony of eyewitnesses to the events.

Richard BAUCKHAM
St Mary's College. The School of Divinity
University of St Andrews
South Street
ST ANDREWS
Fife KY16 9JU Scotland, United Kingdom
E-mail: rjb@st-andrews.ac.uk

55. I have argued this in BAUCKHAM, *Jesus*, 12-21.
56. BAUCKHAM, *Jesus*, chapter 7.

Sumari

Aquest article defensa que el model de la tradició oral, utilitzat pels crítics formals, va ser un error fonamental, com ho demostra gran part del coneixement que ara tenim sobre la tradició oral en moltes altres societats; es proposa com a model alternatiu el testimoniatge dels testimonis oculars com el camí de la tradició dels Evangelis, que hauria estat preservada fins al període de l'escriptura dels Evangelis. Diversos trets dels Evangelis indiquen la fidelitat d'aquestes tradicions com narrades pels testimonis oculars. Els Evangelis s'entenen molt millor com a «història oral», basada en la versió dels testimonis oculars dels esdeveniments.